

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 473 577

CE 084 483

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TITLE Learnin' 'Em Their Letters'--Story, Professional Practice and "New Paradigm" Research.  
INSTITUTION Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium, Nathan. Queensland Centre.  
PUB DATE 2002-00-00  
NOTE 16p.; Commissioned paper used as a focus for an online discussion forum.  
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: [http://www.staff.vu.edu.au/alnarc/onlineforum/AL\\_pap\\_waterhouse.htm](http://www.staff.vu.edu.au/alnarc/onlineforum/AL_pap_waterhouse.htm).  
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)  
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Aboriginal Australians; Adult Education; Adult Learning; Autobiographies; Constructivism (Learning); \*Content Analysis; Economic Change; Experiential Learning; Foreign Countries; \*Futures (of Society); Leadership; Learning Processes; Learning Theories; \*Lifelong Learning; \*Literacy Education; Minority Groups; \*Personal Narratives; Postsecondary Education; Qualitative Research; Research Methodology; Social Environment; Story Telling; Workplace Literacy  
IDENTIFIERS \*Australia; Bruner (Jerome S); Gardner (Howard); Interpretive Research; Work Based Learning

## ABSTRACT

A combination of narrative, autobiographical, and arts-based research methods was used to explore experiential learning and professional practice in diverse teaching/learning and adult education settings. The research methodology drew upon concepts developed by the following individuals: Jerome Bruner and his constructivist approach that values autobiography as a continuing reinterpretation of experience; Howard Gardner and his arguments regarding the place of narrative in effective leadership; and Margaret Meek and her thinking regarding the ubiquitous nature of stories in human culture. Drawing upon these ideas, the author traced her own personal and professional journey from her school days through her entry into the teaching profession to her professional activities in the field of workplace literacy in Australia in the 1990s. She then turned to a discussion of the "ancient metastories of the 1990s" and new stories for building alternative futures across Australia. Selected themes raised during the discussion are as follows: the idea that "fast capitalism" and the "new work order" are not new ideas after all; changing views toward learning in Australia and the view of learning as a commodity; the greatly differing attitudes and behaviors toward indigenous Australians and asylum seekers; and the potential role of literacy practitioners in cultivating, telling, and embodying stories. (Contains 73 references.) (MN)

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ED 473 577

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**Author** Dr P J Waterhouse: Workplace Learning Initiatives

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## Abstract

This paper is based largely on the author's doctoral investigation into literacy, lifelong learning and personal/professional development. Working within the 'new research paradigm' of 'post-positivist interpretive inquiry' (see Caulley 1994) the study utilises narrative, autobiographical and arts-based research methods to illuminate experiential learning and professional practice in a range of teaching/learning and adult education settings. Adopting an innovative and eclectic approach the study adopts psychological, sociological and discursive frames of reference, dealing with personal and social constructions of literacy and identity. The study represents a teacher-researcher's continuing quest for the development of an authentic stance in personal-professional life, a stance which sustains critical and creative energies and which is empowering in both private and public domains.

## Introduction: Research Method & the Power of Story



*We tell stories for many reasons: to entertain, to gossip, as evidence for our arguments, to reveal who we are. Sometimes we tell stories, especially about experiences that are puzzling, powerful or upsetting, in order to render those experiences more sensible. Telling stories offers one way to make sense of what has happened. We may even catch a level of meaning that we only partially grasped while living through something. (Mattingly 1991, p.235)*

### Jerome Bruner: narrative & autobiography

Much of my recent research and professional practice has been wrapped up in processes of considering and telling stories. I have been encouraged by a growing body of scholarship which values narrative - not merely for its entertainment value but for deeper processes of meaning making and world building.

One such scholar is Jerome Bruner (1983, 1986, 1988, 1990, 1994). As a cultural psychologist Bruner explores the nature and purpose of narrative. He speculates that the 'structure of human grammar might have arisen out of a protolinguistic push to narrate' (Bruner 1990, p.138). Thus narrative is closely tied to fundamental processes of meaning making. Stories are not simply for telling, but for making sense of the world. He suggests that there are two paths to demystification (Bruner 1983, p.204). One path utilises processes of logic, analysis and argument. The other path

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uses image, metaphor and story.

Bruner's stance has informed my research which aims to expose and illuminate - for the most part through story telling. Bruner also adopts a constructivist position which values autobiography 'not [as] a record of what happened ... but rather as a continuing interpretation and reinterpretation of our experience' (Bruner 1988, p.575). He believes:

*that the ways of telling and the ways of conceptualizing that go with them become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future. [He argues] that a life as led is inseparable from a life as told - or more bluntly, a life is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold. (Bruner 1988, p.582.)*

The narrative structure, he suggests, with multiple conventions for dealing with place, actions, agents, goals and so on, assists in structuring a meaningful and coherent tale. In so doing we construct our selves. However he also notes that the tale tends to vary according to who is being told.

*We construct not just a single or main self narrative, but a set of them - something like a cast of characters ... we have accessible a small squad of Possible Selves, each based on a somewhat different working over of the past: what we would like to be, what we fear becoming, and so on. (Bruner 1994, p.46)*

Bruner also discusses 'turning points' in autobiographical accounts. He notes how these turning points are almost invariably linked to the notion of agency and generally reflect enhanced agency - 'a new belief, new courage, moral disgust, *having had enough*'. Such incidents are thickly agentive ... [and they are also] drenched in affect - certainly in the telling and presumably in the living' (Bruner 1994, p.50). Hence Bruner sees autobiography as part of the process of personal-socio-cultural construction.

### **Howard Gardner: leadership & story**



There are other scholars working within and building the narrative tradition. In *Leading Minds* (Gardner, 1997) develops a compelling argument for the place of narrative in effective leadership. He considers both 'direct' and 'indirect' leaders and discusses multiple aspects and examples of leadership. The place of narrative or story is central to his analysis. He argues that "Leaders achieve their effectiveness chiefly through the stories they relate." (1997:9.) Gardner draws on detailed case studies of diverse leaders from Margaret Mead to Mahatma Gandhi (there are eleven in all). He argues that despite the diversity of their styles, circumstances and achievements it is the stories they communicate and embody that shape their effectiveness as leaders.

*The ultimate impact of the leader depends most significantly on the particular story that he or she relates or embodies, and the receptions to that story on the part of audiences (or collaborators or followers)... My analysis of leadership comes to focus, therefore, on the stories conveyed by representative leaders. (Gardner, 1997, p.14)*

Gardner's work compels us to reflect upon the stories we are telling in adult and vocational education.

### **Margaret Meek: story & autobiography**



Against this background I choose to interpret the invitation to contribute to this ALNARC Forum as an opportunity for reflection and for storytelling. Literacy scholar Margaret Meek also reminds us of the ubiquitous nature of stories in human culture:

*Like naming, story telling is a universal habit, a part of our common humanity. As far as we know, all cultures have forms of narrative. Stories are part of our conversation, our recollections, our hopes, our fears. Young and old, we all tell stories as soon as we begin to explain or describe events and actions, feelings and motives. (Meek 1991, p.103)*

Meek notes that as she

*began to clear a path through the maze of literacy studies [she] was struck by the apparent indifference to their own literate history on the part of many scholars and researchers, most of whom wrote wisely and well. Unlike poets and novelists who confront their struggles with words ... academics who write about literacy are notoriously reticent about how they learned to read and write. (Meek 1991, p.232)*

She urges self reflection on our own literate histories as a 'good and helpful thing to do'. She draws on her own biography to illustrate the process and challenges others to do the same.

*Come then [she says] What is it to be literate? We have to draw our own maps, trace our own histories, acknowledge our own debts and consider ways not taken. (Meek, 1991, p.234)*

## **A Personal-Professional Research Journey**



My research embraced the challenge set by Meek. It carried me on a ten year reflective journey into the roots and subsequent development of my own literacy(ies), educational philosophy and practice. The study was an exploration of experiential learning in the context of the 'public passage' (Addelson 1994) of adult literacy education in Australia and the practice of education in a range of contexts. The 'tales from the field' (Van Manen 1990) include teaching and learning experiences: at school, at university, in the TAFE College, in Western Samoa as an Australian Volunteer Abroad, in the State Government bureaucracy as a seconded public servant, and in industry contexts as a workplace trainer, consultant, researcher and manager. There is not the scope in this paper to fully describe the narrative, autobiographical and arts-based research methods I adopted for the study. Nor to explain the various means through which I contextualised the stories - situating them within the socio-cultural, political and discursive processes which influenced the study in both subtle and powerful ways . However, with the aim of stimulating discussion and reflection, this paper shares some of the stories, subjectivities and insights that emerged from the research. I close with some reflections on the stories that are shaping our lives.

### **School Days**



Reflecting on the place and value of literacy in my own life led to analysis of early home life and school experiences. The research-writing process identified multiple incidents artefacts and experiences that shaped my 'Ways With Words' (Heath 1990) and subsequent teaching/learning practices. Many of these experiences highlight Bruner's observation about turning points being 'drenched in affect'. Significant learning experiences do not happen simply from the neck up. Learning is as much about the heart, the gut, the body as it is about the brain. Yet it sometimes seems, particularly in vocational training, that practice loses sight of the affective domain in dry 'objective' accounts of workplaces and competencies. My interest was in capturing and understanding the richness and complexity of learning. As Willis notes, when we adopt such a stance adult education emerges as

*a far juicier, fraught and exhilarating process than might have been concluded from instructional manuals setting out objectives, strategies, competencies and generalised information about the 'adult learner' (Willis, 2000, p.62).*

This research reminded me constantly of the complex personal and psychological domains of the learning process. Time and again analysis of significant learning events and experiences highlighted the individuality, even the idiosyncratic nature of meaning making and learning processes. These qualities were revealed in the multiple source materials that represented and reflected the living and learning under scrutiny. They included poems and journal writings, cartoons and intuitive drawings as well as letters, essays and formal reports. Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory and the work of others building upon it, such as Salmon (1980, 1988, 1990) provided useful theoretical frameworks for interpreting and understanding these dimensions of learning.

### ***Passionate Professionals***



At high school I was naive or trusting enough to believe that the books we were compelled to read must have had some intrinsic merit or they wouldn't have been on the booklist in the first place. I was challenged and stimulated by a host of new writers including; Steinbeck, Twain, Orwell and Dickens. Most significantly, there were also poets and dramatists; Dawe, Dunne, T.S. Eliot, Wilfred Owen, Jonson and Shakespeare .

I was also fortunate in having two teachers at secondary school who 'gave me wings'. One of these teachers I shall call Mr. C. At the time he was nearing retirement. I vividly recall a year eleven English class in which Mr. C. decided he would read T. S. Eliot's poetry to us. There was a hushed silence as he took the book and moved to the front of the class. The gravity of his manner suggested something special was about to happen. Mr. C. blew us out of our desks with the power, the passion and the poignancy of his reading. The cold dead lines of the poem burst into life. Mr. C. went red in the face as he continued, he moved about and flailed his arms around, and he was no longer reading, he *knew* the words! We saw anger and pathos and pity and a self mocking kind of humour which we didn't really understand.

*I grow old ... I grow old ...*

*I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.*

*Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?*

*I shall wear white flannel trousers and walk upon the beach.*

*I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.*

*I do not think that they will sing to me.*

*(Eliot, 1970 p.17)*

Some of us were shocked by Mr. C.'s performance, some were cynical, others amused. I felt a stirring I had not known before. There was power in the lines that Eliot had penned, a power that could surge through time and space to transform our somewhat dithery and chalk dusted English teacher; power to energise and move him, and power to touch me in a new way. This was another of the tributaries to the current of literacy, literature and learning that still carries me forward. Once again the power of the affective domain was demonstrated here, as was the potency of poetry. In later years I came to appreciate poetry, and other forms of writing, not merely for sharing knowledge, thoughts and feelings but as fundamental to generating, shaping and constructing knowledge. I came to embrace writing as a form of meaning making and learning. Writing poetry became another way of making sense out of experience, constructing meaning out of chaos.

Reflecting on my experience with Mr C. and significant others also highlights the importance of the



teacher's stance. In Gardner's (1997) terms the research shows the influence of teachers who embody their curriculum, they become their stories. Their passion, their love of their discipline or vocation, inspires and permeates their teaching and their students. The research highlights the importance of passion and professionalism. In a very fundamental sense, we teach who we are.

## Becoming A Teacher



The inspiration I received from Mr C. and a few others encouraged me to become a teacher. It was taken for granted reality that it was a 'good thing' to be a teacher. Yet my identity and 'personal stance' (Salmon 1990) were still tentative and newly forming. When I was introduced to one of my colleague's friends I sought confirmation and approval.

### **Teacher's Friend**

*It was years ago now,  
A colleague, in her kitchen,  
introduced a neighbour.  
A massive agrarian beast of a man;  
boney and weather-beaten,  
with copious hairs sprouting  
from his nose and ears.  
He could mend a fence,  
or pull a calf,  
or a tooth,  
with equal practicality.  
He lumbered forward,  
towering over the pale young professional  
fresh from the university.  
He extended a huge leathery hand,  
"So you'd be another bloody teacher then wouldn' ya?"  
Well, I replied, smiling bravely,  
"You won't hold that against me will you?"  
"That depends entirely," he replied,  
as he squeezed my hand with his steely gaze  
"on what you're teachin' 'em son."*

This encounter, was one of many which contributed to the development of a critical consciousness, as an educator. Such experiences helped me to later appreciate the insights and arguments of writers such as Shor arguing

*if we do not teach in opposition to the existing inequality of races, classes, and sexes, then we are teaching to support it. If we don't teach critically against domination in society, then we allow dominant forces a free hand in school and out. (Shor 1990, p.347)*

My teacher's friend helped me to see that even as a teacher I could be part of the problem. I came to appreciate that the value of literacy is conditional and contingent, depending upon the uses to which it is put. A point which Tolkien expresses eloquently through the voice of Gaffer Gamgee talking about his son Sam's love of stories.

*my lad Sam will know more about that ... Crazy about stories of the old days he is, and*

*he listens to all of Mr Bilbo's tales. Mr Bilbo has learned him his letters - meaning no harm, mark you, and I hope no harm will come of it. (Tolkein, 1991, p.36)*

## Workplace Learning & Change



At this point my story telling takes a chronological leap from the early 1970's to the 1990's. Years of experience (and two case studies in the thesis) are skipped to move to Glynda Hull reflecting on workplace literacy issues.

*In the popular discourse of workplace literacy, we tell just a few stories ... Other stories, with their alternate viewpoints, different voices, and other realities, can help us amend, qualify and fundamentally challenge the popular discourse of literacy and work. (Hull, cited by O'Connor (ed.) 1994 )*

By the early 1990's I was involved in a substantial workplace education project. Our approach was to take education into workplaces and to involve as many stakeholders as possible in the curriculum and program development process. We also wanted to dovetail the training with the realities of the workplace. This meant understanding what was going on, asking questions, observing the processes, learning about how things happen, and why. We did not share the prevailing view that it was worker's deficits and inadequacies that were responsible for the Australian economy's declared lack of international competitiveness in a globalised marketplace. We sought, as Hull advocates, to articulate and embody alternative stories about workers and workplaces.

The formal training programs we developed required shopfloor operators to investigate problems which were relevant to them in their workplaces. One module focused on issues of waste minimisation and environmental management. Individually and in small groups they investigated environmental and waste management issues. They debated the merits of plastic cups for tea and coffee (which were eventually replaced by ceramic mugs). They considered the costs and quality of lighting (and recommended improved lighting and cleaning of the factory skylights). They addressed the problem of disposable ear plugs littering workspaces; they instituted systems for re-using and recycling materials including rags and cardboard; they considered waste disposal, including toxic wastes.

One operator investigated a chemical he used regularly as part of a grinding operation. Over time he began to suspect the chemical was having some effect upon his health. He was introduced to the Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) for the product via the training. It listed some symptoms he had experienced. He decided further investigation was warranted. He conducted a small survey of operators using the product and discovered he was not the only one experiencing side effects. He inspected the work area and collected samples of the dust. Most importantly, he considered the way the chemical was mixed. He noted,

*The MSDS said the health information related to the material **at use dilution**. We mix the Syncut with water but I was not sure about the exact dilution. I asked operators and supervisors, I checked with [the Purchasing Manager] and [with the Storeperson] in the Store. No one could tell me about the correct mixture. The Syncut has always been mixed in just by guessing ... I checked the container for mixing instructions on the label; there were no instructions. There was no SOP [Standard Operating Procedure] ... Without any proper instructions how can we be sure we are using the Syncut at the correct dilution? (Waterhouse & Miller 1996, p.135).*



Eventually he arranged to meet with a sales representative from the chemical supplier and determined the correct dilution rate for the chemical. His subsequent analysis of the chemical

mixtures in the machines on site revealed some surprising findings. They had significant implications for the cost and efficiency of production, waste minimisation, environmental hygiene and occupational health. The operator's report to the company management included data showing the chemical used at concentrations up to five times the recommended strength. Furthermore, his discussions with the supplier revealed that the chemical was:

*... not the right product for [that] Machine because it [was] not designed for that kind of job ... He suggested we use something else (Waterhouse & Miller 1996, p.136)*

This operator concluded his report by recommending purchase of the alternative product. He also supplied a draft of an SOP with correct information on dilution rates and mixing procedures.

This was one of many instances where commitment to integrated training unearthed significant discoveries, suggestions and innovations from the shop floor. However the weight of indifference was sometimes difficult and at times impossible to move. We also found that useful ideas, even when developed thoughtfully and presented carefully, were not always taken up by the decision makers with the authority to implement them. Some of our work also revealed the uncomfortable realities and the 'dark side' of workplace 'reform' processes. These experiences stimulated our continuing interest in issues of workplace culture, the politics of workplace discourses and literacies and the complex relationships between workplace training, learning and change processes.

Subsequent research and practice has continued to explore and document these themes (Sefton, Waterhouse & Deakin 1994, Sefton Waterhouse & Cooney 1995, Waterhouse 1996, Waterhouse & Sefton 1997, Virgona et al 1998, Waterhouse 1999a, 199b, Waterhouse Wilson & Ewer 1999 ). Throughout much of this work we have become characters in a meta-tale told by others. The dominant narrative has been one of workplace change, globalisation and what Gee and Lankshear describe as 'fast capitalism' (1995). In the new work order, they argue, traditional hierarchies are collapsed and workers are transformed into 'associates' and 'partners'. Such employees are expected to be highly motivated, self managing and personally committed to their work. They should be willing and able to communicate their needs and their knowledge and to continuously improve their performance. Furthermore, they should be prepared to accept responsibility for their own careers; 'They must not expect the business to sustain them in the long run' (Gee & Lankshear 1995, p.7).

## **The Ancient Metastories of the 1990's**



Neville's research interests lead him to suggest that this 'fast capitalism' and the 'new work order' (Gee et al. 1996) may not be entirely new after all. Working within the discourse of archetypal psychology (see Hillman 1977, 1983, Miller 1981) Neville shows how old stories may inform the 'new'. He suggests that current trends may be seen as representations of archetypal human patterns. The Hermes archetype is both recognisable and ancient. Neville notes that of all the Greek gods Hermes seems to have been the best loved and was perceived as the friendliest. This despite his 'slippery, deceiving, seductive and non-heroic character'. Hermes is known by many names

*and takes many forms: the god of travellers, the god of shepherds, the god of merchants and markets, the god of persuasiveness, the trickster, the god of lies and deceit, the god of gamblers, the god of thieves, the god of illusions, the god of shamanic medicine, the god of cross-roads and boundaries, the god of connections, of quicksilver, of fast footwork and smooth talking. He is the divine entrepreneur, a con man without ethics and without malice. He has no values of his own, no concern for substance. He enjoys doing deals, being clever, playing the game. He is the herald of the gods, the connector, the carrier of information, the god of secret knowledge (and insider trading). Hermes does not craft anything, like Hephaistos. He does not manage anything, like Zeus, or lead us to understanding like Apollo, or ensure the smooth functioning of society, ... He does not*



*fight, like Ares, or nourish, like Demeter, or protect the weak ... He loves paradox and process, trickery and risk. He is ambiguous and many faced. He is everybody's mate. (Neville 1995 p. 51)*

Our current context is one which Neville (1992a,1994) characterises as Hermes inflated. He suggests that 'Australian society has recently been worshipping the god of the marketplace with an excess of devotion.' Learning has become a commercial commodity, colleges and adult education centres have become providers, their product is 'learner enhancement'. Students and learners are now defined as customers, clients, or perhaps, as raw material to be processed. Researchers exploring the socio-political contexts shaping education have noted:

*it is clear that, in general, the influence of economic imperatives and 'the bottom line' is changing the educational environment. The first imperative was that teachers needed to compete successfully in the marketplace if they were to have any influence. (Brown et al. 1996, p.318)*

Under economic rationalism notions of competition and prosperity are linked as if they are logically and inevitably bound together. Hermes, we remember, is both persuasive and pervasive. Saul (ref) however suggests that the apparent power of these storylines is a result of what he calls the 'theft of decision making' in a corporatist society. He suggests we are in the grip of corporatist, neo-conservative ideologies.

*we are enthralled by a new all-powerful clockmaker god - the marketplace - and his archangel, technology. Trade is the marketplace's miraculous cure for all that ails us. And globalisation is the eden or paradise into which the just shall be welcomed on Judgement Day. (Saul 1997, p.19-20)*

Saul's reference to the 'archangel' technology echoes Neville's perspective on the place of technology in education (1992a, 1992b, 1994, 1995). He suggests it is also instructive to consider the story of Prometheus, the ancient Greek god of technology. (According to the ancient tale) Prometheus is the god who crafts the first men from clay and has the goddess Athena breathe life into them. He steals the fire of technology from the forge of Hephaistos, the blacksmith god and brings it down to earth to protect men from the anger of Zeus.

*Prometheus' heroic crime gave us control over our world. We are no longer entirely ruled by the whims of the gods; we can keep ourselves warm; we can make things; we are not afraid of the dark ... [This is not all of the tale, which cannot be told here. But, Neville reminds us ...] There is a down side of this story. When Prometheus gave men technology he took away their knowledge of the future. He gave them the means of production and the skills to use them, but not the sense to use them wisely. (Neville 1992b, p.242)*

The Promethean influence in education has survived. Harmsworth, the Director of the Office of Training and Further Education (OTFE) in Victoria, argued for governments around Australia to underwrite the development of 'electronic services platforms' which would enable providers to administer and deliver education via the internet 'irrespective of location and time'. Such 'Virtual Campus' approaches would 'require all students to use computers on an every day basis as part of their training' (Harmsworth 1997, p.4-5).

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Whilst there is undeniable potential in these new technologies there is also cause for concern in the missionary zeal of some Promethean arguments. The assumption that training, let alone learning, can be 'delivered' so easily begs a series of fundamental questions about teaching and learning processes. The Prometheans also argue that the new technologies will enable access to education for disadvantaged learners - the technology (as the original myth suggests) will bring freedom. However

the assumptions about flexibility, openness and access can be challenged. (Merriam, 1996) cites research which suggests that the beneficial qualities of the new technologies are, at best, double edged benefits. Digital technologies may be exacerbating existing inequalities by further disadvantaging those least able to exploit them and empowering those already relatively privileged. These inequalities exist both between and within nations. Merriam is not alone in highlighting these concerns (Kearns, 1997, Jakupcek & McTaggart 1996). Such concerns however, are rarely considered serious by Promethean advocates. As Neville notes:

*The worshippers of Prometheus do not take kindly to being told they are simple-minded. Prometheus inspires them with his own arrogance. They see themselves as revolutionaries, heroically defying the conservative forces ... The myth tells us explicitly that Prometheus takes from them their ability to foresee the future. Infatuation with technology leaves no room for doubts about where technology might lead. (Neville 1992b, pp 236-252)*

The positioning of the opposition and the narrow focus upon acquisition of discrete and measurable skills is as Neville points out, entirely consistent with the myth of Prometheus. In this mindset human beings are made in the image of the machine and machine-like performance is therefore the ultimate goal. Such views of society and education promote particular conceptions of self and the literate individual. (Green et al, 1997) offer a socio-historical analysis. They note that the influence of economic rationalist ideologies in education

*has stressed the measurable production of 'human capital'. The aim became production of productive workers, skilled in new technologies and adapted to a flexible, post-Fordist economy. Most recently this has led to literacy being redefined in terms of measurable, occupationally valuable competencies. (Green et al 1997, p.21)*

Neville cites Hermes as the dominant 'god' of the last decade and Green et al suggest the corresponding literate individual is the 'economic subject'. Others have explored the relationship between constructions of literacy and the expectations of the economy and the workplace. (Bessant 1986, 1988, 1989-90) and (Graff 1987, 1993) provide historical analyses illuminating the way what 'counts' as literacy is shaped by the prevailing socio-economic shifts and changing expectations. Most critical analyses tend to highlight the relatively limited conceptions of literacy and the individual which prevail (Gowen, 1992, Brown (ed) 1994, O'Connor (ed) 1994, Hull (ed) 1997). The elements of personal growth and individuality are curtailed except to the extent that they serve the interests of the workplace. Notions of empowerment are reduced to conceptions of functional empowerment as employees are given only such authority as befits their circumscribed roles within the workplace. This is empowerment to serve more efficiently and productively rather than empowerment to question servitude. There is also little sense of a wider 'liberal' education, little recognition of art or literature for its own sake and the essential affective domain is largely ignored. The valued competencies are those which are seen to provide some clear instrumental outcome or application. As Green et al note 'what is clear is the shift from literature to literacy as the organising principle for constructing what counts' (p.21).

## **New Stories for Building Alternative Futures**



*It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story. (Berry cited in D.Suzuki 1997)*

The dominant Hermean and Promethean meta-narratives are now inadequate even where they are necessary. Calling for educators to 'reimpose their will' on the information economy Schofield notes that the 'social and political considerations are increasingly obscured by the economic and

technological considerations' (1999:2). She stresses that,

*the language we choose to use always reflects our cultural values. By using 'Economy' rather than 'Age' or 'Society' to describe the era being shaped by globalisation, we are sending the message that what matters is the economy, that personal, working and political relationships which are being reshaped by globalisation are essentially economic relationships and that the social and political dimensions of globalisation are simply trickle down impacts of economic and technological imperatives. (Schofield, 1999, p.5)*

Yet the Promethean and Hermean stories are not the only stories that might inspire and shape our practice. Bernie Neville reminds us there are 'Other Myths, Other Gods to Teach By' (1992b). He is supported by others, Beckett (1997) for instance, notes that the influence of Eros seems to have declined. Eros is the god of relationships and pleasure, qualities which are found in the work of all the best teachers,

*when they energise a class with a love for the content, and a love for learning itself ... Humour, anecdote, negotiation and spontaneity are hallmarks of this kind of learning, and this sort of teaching. (Beckett 1997, p.4)*

As well as Eros, Neville (1992b) reminds us of the Pantheon of players we may draw upon. We can briefly consider a few; for the ancient Greeks Apollo was the sun god. He represented 'clarity, intelligence, science, the ability to show things the way they are'. He promoted balance and rational, clear headed thinking. Apollo's moderation might be a very useful influence in these times of chaos and disorder. Ares is best known as the god of war but he also has a positive side. His energy, fearlessness and preparedness to take action wouldn't go astray in challenging the apathy, disinterest and disengagement that characterise our 'unconscious civilisation' (Saul 1997). If we paid more heed to the story of Demeter, the Great Mother, we might build organisations that were more trusting, more nurturing and more worthy of loyalty. Aphrodite is a goddess of life and beauty, her aesthetics suggest delight in experience and the pleasures of life. A greater appreciation of life and enhanced sensitivity to the beauty in our world wouldn't be a bad thing. Our practice in adult education could be shaped by polytheistic world views. We could 'worship' no one 'god' as the singular source of wisdom, but appreciate the insights of many.

Saul (1997), Suzuki (1990), Suzuki and McConnell (1997), Theobald (1997), Reason (2002) and Beder (2000) amongst a host of others suggest the value of different approaches. Growing disparities in incomes, environmental degradation and the lack of participatory democracy and social justice provide compelling evidence of the need for alternative stories. If adult and vocational education is not part of the solution then it must be part of the problem.

*According to Victor Keegan, writing in the British newspaper "The Guardian", the richest 20% of the world's population increased their share of total global wealth from 70% to 85%; while the poorest lost ground moving down from 2.3% to 1.4% in the same period. (cited by Theobald 1997, p.10)*



(Richard Neville 1997) points out that the economic driving forces are no longer governments (with at least nominal responsibilities to their peoples) but corporations (with responsibilities to their shareholders).

*Of the world's 100 largest economies, 51 are corporations. (Mitsubishi is larger than Indonesia, General Motors is larger than Thailand or Denmark.) To whom are these megacorps accountable? Not to you or me. Not to the Governments of the countries in which they operate ... The combined revenue of the world's top ten firms is greater than the combined GNP of the world's 100 smallest countries. (Neville 1997, p.48)*

He cites an advertisement from Fortune magazine, placed by the Government of the Phillipines to encourage business investment.

*To attract companies like yours ... we have felled mountains, razed jungles, filled swamps, moved rivers, relocated towns ... all to make it easier for you and your business to do business here. (Neville 1997 p.48-9)*

Distinguished scientists and commentators express alarm and dismay at the environmental degradation of our planet. The World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: 'signed by more than sixteen hundred senior scientists from seventy-one countries, including over half of all Nobel Prize winners' warns of the need for

*a great change in our stewardship of the Earth and life on it ... if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated. (Suzuki & McConnell 1997, p.4)*

Writing out of a completely different discipline Reason also cites the twin crises of 'justice and sustainability' as the most urgent and compelling challenges we face.

*In the end, [he says] we have no choice but to engage with these issues sooner or later. If we do so sooner we can do so with more dignity and more hope. (Reason 2002, p.15)*

In Australia we face all of these issues along with others unique to our context. We face the continuing obscenity of Aboriginal deaths in custody and the twin tragedies of faltering processes for reconciliation with indigenous Australians on the one hand; and compassionate acceptance of asylum seekers on the other. Some VET research and practice has begun to explore issues of 'social capital' and in so doing has exposed the inadequacies of purely economic conceptions of 'demand'. (Falk 1997, Kilpatrick & Bell 1998a, 1998b, Childs & Wagner 1998). (Billett, 1998) has argued cogently for a conception of vocational education that embraces regions and communities as recognised stakeholders - thus advocating a move away from the corporatist model described by Saul (1997). Schofield (1999) has highlighted the way adult and vocational education practice is linked to notions of culture and citizenship. Yet such links are neither fully appreciated nor understood. Sefton et al (1994) have demonstrated how it is possible to 'breathe life' into training - even in workplaces and 'mainstream' accredited courses. Cairns and colleagues (Malloch, Cairns & Hase 1998) have also explored notions of 'capability' that push vocational education beyond orthodox and reductionist views of competence. Seddon and colleagues have investigated 'capacity building' practices and organisations (Seddon 1997, Seddon, Angus and Brown 1997) that draw upon the best of the past whilst still recognising and responding to the need for change and development.

All of this, I suggest, has much to do with the themes and concerns of our ALNARC forum. To speculate upon the place and value of literacy in lifelong learning and socio-economic wellbeing entails also considering our own sense of vocation and purpose. Sandberg (2000) building on a constructivist understanding of work and practice, has shown how 'competence' is contingent, shaped not only by the workplace context but by the ways the work is conceived and understood. This is surely also true for us. How 'competent', how useful, how effective we are, depends on how we conceptualise, appreciate and enact our work and ourselves.

There is no question that those involved in literacy practices and literacy education are in potentially powerful positions for cultivating, telling and embodying stories. In short, there is rich potential for leadership in this field. Whether we practice as teachers, tutors, trainers, managers, administrators, researchers, policy makers ... it does not matter, the stories we choose to cultivate, to tell and embody through our practice will determine our effectiveness. The stories are 'chosen' through the ways we conceive of ourselves and our work.

'In the end', we may, like Mr Bilbo Baggins, be merely "learnin' 'em their letters" and hoping no harm will come of it. But the value of our work and our literacies, as my Teacher's Friend pointed out, still 'depends entirely' on what and how we're teachin' them.

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